



Health

Tooth scaries

Dentists bite back at phobic patients

By BARBARA HOFFMAN

IF the drill and pointy tools weren't frightening enough, there are those movies that make you terrified to go within a mile of a dentist's office.

First came Roger Corman's "Little Shop of Horrors," with Jack Nicholson as a nitrous-oxide-addled masochist — then the remake, with Steve Martin as the white-coated sadist.

Next up: "Marathon Man," in which Laurence Olivier's Nazi dentist aimed his drill at Dustin Hoffman's pearly whites, hissing, "Is it safe? Is it safe?"

Hardly. Now playing is the latest oral-hygiene horror flick — "The Secret Lives of Dentists," with Hope Davis and Campbell Scott — whose trays of scary tools and close-ups of open-mouthed gore can set anyone's teeth on edge.

Even the dentists'. "It basically portrayed a typical, white-knuckled patient in the chair," grouses Dr. Clifford Williams, a restorative and cosmetic dentist in Manhattan.

But for him, the most painful part of the film was the infidelity between the married leads.

"It could have been two lawyers, two veterinarians," Williams says. "I don't know why they brought dentists into it!"

Nevertheless, dental phobia is a very real problem, with serious consequences. An estimated 120 million Americans are so afraid of going to the dentist that they don't — paying the way for root canals or worse.

Dr. Louis Siegelman, who specializes in apprehensive patients, has known some who've gone literally decades between visits.

"I have patients who glue their teeth in, who've made their own teeth out of wood — out of rulers, out of wax," he says.



Films like "Marathon Man," in which Nazi driller Laurence Olivier tortures a captive Dustin Hoffman, certainly don't help those already afraid of the dentist's chair.

Breathe deeply, open wide

DENTISTS these days offer the fearful help beyond laughing gas and Novocain. Some even provide massages and virtual-reality goggles.

Here are some other ways to relax in the hot seat:

■ Bring your Walkman. (We're still waiting on the noiseless drill.)

■ Practice deep, slow breathing. It helps by relaxing muscles — which help relax you.

■ Consider Valium. Many dentists will give you one, if you've had it be-

fore and someone can take you home.

■ Find a dentist with whom you have a rapport. "I find the less I talk about dentistry, the quicker it goes," says Dr. Michael Margolin, who talks to his patients about movies, restaurants and vacations — "the same conversation we'd have if we were just hanging out."

"If you can talk to a dentist about your fears, about what you like and don't like," adds New York's Dr. Louis Siegelman, "that's worth milligrams of medication."

— Barbara Hoffman

gone so brown that she'd put little pieces of paper towels over them before she left the house.

After she left his office, he'd find them in his waiting room.

("You laugh," Dr. Siegelman chided. "But these patients are my jewels!") Dr. Williams recalls patients

who've learned to talk with their hands in front of their mouths — and men who've grown big bushy mustaches that effectively hide their upper teeth.

He's also seen procrastinators who've simply run out of excuses.

Some work in the same

building Williams does, and they've canceled repeatedly for all kinds of reasons: emergency meetings, delayed flights — even a death in the family.

Which makes it all the more embarrassing, the dentist says, when he or his staff runs into them in the lobby, smoking.